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1970/12/17

MEMORANDUM

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Meeting between President Thieu, Ambassador
Bunker and General Haig

TIME: 6:00 P.M., Saigon Time - December 17, 1970

PLACE: The Presidential Palace

General Haig stated to President Thieu that he has requested the appointment to see him so that he would have an opportunity to explain to him the purpose of his visit to Cambodia and South Vietnam to outline the impressions gained during the visit and most importantly to bring to President Thieu a message from President Nixon.

President Thieu stated that he knew General Haig and his team had spent several days visiting Phnom Penh and that he was anxious to have their impressions.

General Haig stated that at the outset he wished to convey to President Thieu, President Nixon's warmest personal regards and his expression of admiration for the wise and effective leadership which President Thieu was providing to the Vietnamese people at this critical time. Further, President Nixon wished President Thieu to be assured of his continuing support in his efforts to achieve our common goals. General Haig stated that while in Phnom Penh he had the benefit of extensive discussions with General Lon Nol and General Matak, as well as discussions with members of the U.S. country team. He stated that he found Lon Nol to be vigorous and confident, but at the same time, more conscious of, and sensitive to, the problems which lay ahead for Cambodia. In short, he had found that Lon Nol appeared to reflect a more realistic outlook than that manifested during General Haig's discussions with Lon Nol last Spring. For example, last Spring Lon Nol had outlined ambitious plans for sweeping the enemy forces from Cambodia, this plan included Lon Nol's intention of launching an early offensive designed to clear the area surrounding Phnom Penh.

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The FANK could then proceed rapidly to expel the enemy from the occupied territory of northeast Cambodia. During this visit General Lon Nol confirmed that his forces were extremely limited in their offensive capabilities and stated that their interim strategy would have to be limited to defending the heavily populated and rice producing areas of Central and Southern Cambodia. His efforts must be confined to maintaining the viability of the areas bordered roughly by Kompong Thong in the North, South on Route 6 to the capitol, East from the capitol on Route 7 to Khampong Cham, and West to Angkor Wat. Routes 1, 4, and 5 were included as vital arteries which would have to remain open.

General Haig stated that he was encouraged that General Lon Nol had adopted a far more realistic strategy for the immediate future. He stated that Lon Nol had requested certain military assistance items on an emergency basis, most of which had been already satisfied by Headquarters MACV. General Haig stated that the general impressions of his team were that General Lon Nol and his high command lacked time-sensitive intelligence on the military situation in the outlying areas. He stated that the team believed that greater efforts would have to be made by the U.S. Embassy, including the use of US assets in South Vietnam to help the Khmer Regime in this crucial area. The information on which decisions were being made by General Lon Nol was frequently based on out-dated intelligence or inaccurate rumor. General Haig stated that despite the fact that the situation in Cambodia had become quite serious, it was evident that the regime was still determined to carry the battle to the enemy and to maintain its resistance. General Haig stated that a serious problem that he had discussed with President Thieu last Spring still existed. While in Phnom Penh, there were continued references to the misbehaviour and thoughtless performance of RVN troops. Although the leadership there was very conscious of the need to prevent rumors of this kind from dominating the attitudes of the Cambodian people, it was very evident that both governments will have to concentrate maximum attention to this problem area. General Haig informed President Thieu that on Sunday, General Lon Nol had called in the Cambodian press to instruct them to avoid exaggerated reporting on this issue. General Haig added that Lon Nol had told him that it was very important that he continue to have responsive and positive South Vietnamese military support.

General Haig concluded his review of the situation in Cambodia by pointing out that his group considered the Cambodian military to be

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very weak, lacking in firepower and communications and, most importantly, lacking in experienced leadership at the company and battalion level. While dedication and determination were important ingredients, alone they could not defeat an experienced, wily, and dedicated enemy. Therefore, all in his group agreed that Cambodia must have in the near term, substantial help from both the United States and South Vietnam.

General Haig then turned to his team's impressions of the situation in South Vietnam. In sum, the group was encouraged by indications everywhere that the military and overall security situation was improving. It was obvious to all that the operations in Cambodia had resulted in great benefits for Vietnam, especially in the III and IV Corps areas. It was also evident that the prevention of the restoration of the former sanctuary areas in Cambodia was a key element in the progress South Vietnam would make in improving the security of the Southern Corps areas. General Haig stated that his team was encouraged by the obviously improved performance of the RF/PF and PSDF forces in those areas they were able to visit. This improved performance was the main factor which permitted VNAF main forces to bring the battle to the enemy within heretofore safe-haven sanctuary base areas in South Vietnam and in Cambodia as well. General Haig stated that the performance of the RVNAF was especially encouraging. Unquestionably, the performance of the ARVN and the Air Force in the Khampong Cham area constituted a remarkable feat of professionalism and augured well for the future.

General Haig recalled that last Spring he had asked President Thieu to continue efforts to improve the quality of the ARVN leadership. He was pleased to note that great progress had been made. Everywhere the team had observed and heard of the skill and dedication of the ARVN Corps and division commanders and the effectiveness of the JGS. Obviously, there were still some minor exceptions to this improved quality but in general the team could now reassure President Nixon that this nagging problem of earlier years had been eliminated by President Thieu's decisive leadership.

General Haig turned next to the economic and political situation in South Vietnam. He noted that the team was encouraged by the results of recent economic measures but recognized that this was a difficult and complex problem which would require continued U. S.

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assistance and intense efforts by all, especially as the U.S. physical presence continued to decline.

General Haig noted that the recent visit of Vice President Ky to the U.S. had achieved a success which surpassed everyone's hopes. The Vice President's performance and reception had achieved a positive impact everywhere. General Haig stated that his team had been pleased to note a general atmosphere of support for the South Vietnam constitution and had been impressed by the obvious continued extension of central authority and presence into the countryside. General Haig stated that President Nixon was pleased with the results of the U.S. Congressional elections as they reflected a trend toward increasing support for the President's foreign policy. The recent Congressional approval of the President's supplemental request was evidence of the shifting U.S. attitude. Despite the favorable trend, it was obvious that the forthcoming U.S. Presidential contest would generate more emphasis on the traditional domestic criticism of the South Vietnamese government. It was, therefore, especially important that some progress be shown in combatting corruption in SVN. It was obvious that President Nixon's political opponents would continue to exploit this issue as our domestic campaign began to gain momentum. This same phenomena would make continuing progress on land reform, justice and the equitable distribution of economic benefits obvious focal points for attack in the U.S. domestic scene.

General Haig then turned to President Nixon's strategy for the ensuing dry season. General Haig stated that President Nixon had discussed this problem with Dr. Kissinger and Secretary Laird and that he had concluded that allied forces must not permit the enemy to have free reign in carrying out his offensive plans. Rather, President Nixon favored preemptive offensive operations as best designed to attrit the enemy, disrupt his timetable and improve Cambodia's prospects for survival. Offensive gains on our part would also strengthen President Thieu's government and ultimately contribute to the success of the Vietnamization program. For this reason, President Nixon and Dr. Kissinger had asked General Haig to discuss the allied dry season campaign with President Thieu and General Abrams when General Haig arrived in Saigon. It was quite evident that President Thieu, Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams and Vien were already well

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down the road toward developing a bold and imaginative dry season offensive strategy designed to carry the battle to the enemy. General Haig stated that President Nixon visualized a three-phased offensive which would include swift ARVN thrusts into Southern and Central Cambodia designed to afford prompt relief to the Cambodian Government and to prevent the reestablishment of the sanctuary areas along Cambodia's border with SVN, thereby facilitating continued progress in pacification throughout III and IV Corps. Secondly, the President visualized a bold and imaginative thrust into the enemy's logistic nerve center either in Northeastern Cambodia or Southern Laos in the Bolevens area. However, during General Haig's first meeting with General Abrams, he learned that President Thieu and General Vien had already concluded that a two-division thrust into Tchepone over Route 9 would achieve even greater results. Finally, General Haig stated President Nixon hoped that the South Vietnamese could institute a covert raid program during the Laotian operation designed to freeze enemy reserves in North Vietnam and bring home to the enemy its own susceptibility to allied counter-action within North Vietnamese territory.

General Haig stated that President Nixon hoped that an imaginative and effective military campaign of this type could be implemented and that the operations along Route 7 could begin as early as January 15 and the Laotian operation just after Tet in early February. The raids against North Vietnam to be conducted consecutively with and under the cover of the Laotian operation. We also visualized that a concurrent political scenario could be followed designed to place the greatest possible pressure on Hanoi and facilitate overcoming the political difficulties which stepped-up allied operations could generate. Specifically, we recalled that Ambassador Bunker had mentioned this fall that President Thieu had been considering a political initiative of this type. Further, Vice President Ky during his discussions with President Nixon and Dr. Kissinger had mentioned such a political initiative. We, of course, expected that President Thieu would be the ultimate authority for such an initiative both as to its modalities and character and its timing. However, we were thinking of a proposal along the following lines:

-- One designed to enhance the authority and manifest the strength and confidence of the Thieu Government.

-- One which would reinforce the present constitution.

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-- One which could serve as a demonstration of the peaceful intent of the Thieu Government.

-- One which could be implemented in whole or partially by the GVN despite its reception by the other side and with maximum international fanfare.

We visualize the specifics of such an initiative as follows:

-- Sometime in January, hopefully before the Cambodian offensive, President Thieu would offer to discuss with the NLF the conditions under which they might participate in the Lower House and Presidential elections of 1971.

-- Recognizing that the NLF might well refuse to enter into such discussions, President Thieu might then in March or April unilaterally invite the NLF to present a list of candidates to add to those already presented under the provisions of the electoral law.

-- Concurrently, President Thieu might invite, through the United Nations or appropriate allies, international observers to visit South Vietnam to witness and judge the fairness of the coming elections.

The foregoing initiative would, of course, be worked out in detail between President Thieu and Ambassador Bunker and we would hope consultations leading toward such an initiative could commence as soon as possible.

President Thieu stated that he was grateful to President Nixon for his kind message and welcomed the visit of General Haig and his team. He stated that the Cambodian situation was the subject of some concern to him, especially as U.S. forces continue to be withdrawn. He stated that the introduction of ARVN Airborne Forces into Kampong Cham could modify the nature and timing of future ARVN operations in Cambodia. The Cambodian forces are very weak, lack leadership and do not seem to comprehend the nature of the enemy they are engaging. Furthermore, the Cambodians have not gone about solving their problems in a realistic way. They have not yet devised a military plan and strategy for the defense of Cambodia. They have neglected completely the need

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to conduct this war on both the military and political front. They must realize that the enemy will turn the people against them and, therefore, they need a pacification program such as that being followed in South Vietnam. Until the Cambodians have such a strategy they will be forced to call for South Vietnamese help in emergency after emergency. They cannot expect us to respond to each call at the expense of our own security.

During the most recent operation, the South Vietnamese had been forced to do everything on their own with little U.S. air support. Future operations in Cambodia must be fully supported by the U.S., both with air support and logistic support. Also, ARVN would need to borrow POL tankers to support its armored elements. President Thieu then recalled his discussions with General Lon Nol, during which he told Lon Nol that for now Cambodia's greatest need was a realistic plan and the maintenance of Route 1 which would keep ARVN forces and supplies only 6 hours away. Since then, the ARVN has kept Route 1 open but no plan has been forthcoming.

General Haig stated he was somewhat encouraged that General Lon Nol now appeared to realize that his strategy must be firmed up and that it must be a modest one. In this regard, General Abrams had told him that a new military triumverate would be established which would include General Weyand, General Mahn and an appropriate Cambodian counterpart. General Haig hoped it would be General Satsukan. This group could meet regularly and do much to improve Cambodian planning and performance and improve coordination between all sides. General Haig stated he would raise the issue of U.S. support to ARVN as soon as he returned to Washington.

President Thieu stated that his operations in Cambodia posed serious political and military problems. The enemy he believed was intent on achieving some kind of victory before the elections in October and this would be designed to shatter the peoples' confidence in the government and also to influence the U.S. electorate. He was certain that they were building to do this now. Yet the United States continued to withdraw its forces at a precipitous rate. How could we expect him to move large elements from III Corps into Cambodia when we are stripping our forces down to one brigade and one Cav Squadron which General Abrams says must be used largely to protect its own bases? President Thieu

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continued by pointing out that the people of South Vietnam could not understand the continued withdrawal of U.S. forces as ARVN forces operate at extended distances in Cambodia. President Thieu stated that if the United States expected him to do the job in Cambodia and Southern Laos then he wanted the following things: The draw-down of U.S. forces between 1 May and 1 July should be very modest. More importantly, the U.S. should then hold its troops at a steady level until the elections are over in October. The U.S. could, of course, announce a long-term program for the next increment but the removal of forces should not begin until after elections. In this way, the South Vietnamese people will be assured of some security while the ARVN is busy in Cambodia.

Concerning the political initiative, President Thieu agreed that a proposal could be developed but that he would have to consider carefully the nature of the proposal, as well as its timing. He believed that the proposal might come after the Chup operation and not before so as to gain maximum political impact. For example, if the Chup operation succeeds, then the appearance of reasonableness by a victorious government seemed to him most attractive. He would have to work hard on specifics because the initiative could not be warmed over milk.

Ambassador Bunker stated he was confident that we could work together to prepare a novel and effective proposal.

President Thieu indicated he would start planning now. He then asked General Haig for his opinion of the political climate.

General Haig stated that at home the war issue had quieted down somewhat. However, President Nixon's upcoming elections would likely raise again all of the old issues, especially that of corruption. In short, we are in a somewhat better position but one which was fragile and could be shortlived in the face of a setback in Cambodia, South Vietnam or the failure to take action against corruption.

President Thieu stated his problem had much to do with the court system and the Minister of Justice. Some corruption cases had not been brought to trial. Now there was a new Minister and he looked forward to some movement in this area. Thieu added facetiously to the effect that the U.S. had urged democracy on the South Vietnamese and

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now the government is inhibited in its ability to act. President Thieu then commented on the efforts to prepare the new electoral law. He stated the main need was to reduce the number of Presidential Candidates. Parties could not develop under the present law; therefore, it must be changed. Actually, President Thieu continued, he would favor a two-party system. In this way, effective parties would evolve, one on the left and one on the right, and a more effectual and stable government would result. President Thieu stated the new law would also allow only one month of campaigning.

General Haig stated that he would bring President Thieu's concerns about our future withdrawals to the President's attention.

President Thieu then stated he believed the withdrawal of U.S. forces had raised some serious concerns among the people. Therefore, he believed it would be necessary for the government to prepare a long-range economic plan which would reflect continued U.S. participation. As your forces are withdrawn, the people must know you are not abandoning South Vietnam. Therefore, such a plan is an urgent necessity. The President then asked General Haig to extend his warmest personal regards to President Nixon and the meeting adjourned at 7:15 p.m.

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